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SUBJECT: BUILDING CONFIDENCE FOR PEACE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

11. (U) SUMMARY. The Ambassador continued to focus attention on U.S. assistance in conflict-affected areas in the Southern Philippines during a visit to Zamboanga City and Basilan Province to observe U.S.-funded development projects and meet with local Basilan business leaders. Recently-appointed Presidential Peace Advisor, Secretary Hermogenes Esperon, joined the Ambassador in his first visit to the southern Philippines since stepping down as head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in order to assume his new position. Throughout the day, the Ambassador and Secretary Esperon emphasized the importance of development assistance in the Philippines-U.S. partnership bringing peace and prosperity to the Philippines. The United States Agency for International Development assistance projects included opening a reading corner at a center for homeless and orphaned youth, providing computers and internet connections to a high school in Zamboanga City, the formal turn-over of a newly completed bridge, and celebrating the progress being made by some former MNLF combatants who have ventured into fish-farming in Lamitan, Basilan Province. All events were well attended by local officials, enthusiastic crowds, and both local and national media.
END SUMMARY.

BACK TO SCHOOL

12. (U) Flanked by Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat and Secretary Esperon, the Ambassador toured one of USAID's Education Quality and Access for Learning and Livelihood Skills (EQuALLS) assistance projects dedicated to providing literacy and livelihood training for out-of-school, orphaned, and homeless youth. Zamboanga City is one of 39 USAID-EQuALLS project beneficiary cities. Several dozen students, teachers, and social workers watched as the Ambassador, Secretary Esperon, and Mayor Lobregat cut a ribbon formally opening a "reading area" complete with donated books, lighting, and chairs. Afterwards, Ambassador Kenney read one of the donated books to several children and visited the skills-training area where older students demonstrated their paper-making processes. EQuALLS will also refurbish a building to be used for additional alternative learning classes and skills training.

CLICK AND THE WORLD IS YOURS

13. (U) Greeted by a throng of cheering students and teachers, the Ambassador, Secretary Esperon, and Zamboanga City Mayor Lobregat arrived at Cabaluay National High School to turn over an assistance package of computer resources under USAID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) program. As of July, 2008, the CLIC program has helped introduce computer and internet education in 672 high schools in Muslim Mindanao, with a combined enrollment of over half a million students. The Ambassador and Secretary Esperon spoke to the assembled student body on the importance of becoming citizens of the world and then toured the school's computer laboratory. The CLIC program, USAID pays the cost of the internet connection for the first year, with the school's Parent Teacher Community Association (PTCA) taking on the responsibility after the first year.

A BUSINESS LUNCH

14. (U) Upon arriving in the town of Lamitan, in the island-province of Basilan, the Ambassador and Secretary Esperon joined Lamitan Mayor Roderick Furigay at a luncheon with local business leaders of Lamitan. During the luncheon, the Ambassador and Secretary Esperon moderated a free-ranging discussion on regional and national economic issues with the chamber's largely small business owners. Throughout the discussion, the Ambassador praised the business people for their sustained efforts to create a peaceful business climate in their region of the Southern Philippines.

BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

15. (U) The Ambassador traveled to the southern part of Lamitan City to the site of the new Camanse Bridge, the latest of some 870 infrastructure Projects completed by USAID throughout conflict-affected areas of the Southern Philippines. The new bridge replaces an old makeshift bridge that would regularly be covered by floodwaters during the rainy season, increasing transport time and costs. The new Camanse Bridge allows the safe and timely delivery of commercial agricultural products. At the bridge's ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by Basilan Governor Jum Jainuddin Akbar and Lamitan Mayor Furigay, Secretary Esperon remarked that this region of Basilan had made incredible progress since he had struggled to maintain order there as a young lieutenant fresh from the Philippine Military Academy some 30 years ago, and more recently as head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Now, with infrastructure and

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development projects created by the partnerships between the USG and local government units, the bridge is symbolic of the progress made towards peace and stability. Secretary Esperon stated that, "this is not only a bridge for providing access; it is also a bridge for building friendship and solidarity."

MAKING PEACE PAY

16. (U) A large group of former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants who were assisted by USAID to enter into the high-value fish-farming business welcomed the Ambassador and Secretary Esperon to the MNLF's regional headquarters in Basilan, where the Ambassador participated in a ceremony turning over a motorboat engine assembly to one group of the former combatants and witnessed the signing of a sales agreement between another group of the combatants and a high-value fish buyer from nearby Isabela City. The motorboat engine assembly will allow the cooperative to double its income by being able to transport their harvest to markets in Zamboanga city, rather than selling them at farmgate prices at the point where they are grown. USAID has been working with both groups of former combatants (and scores of additional groups as well) since 2003 in an attempt to help the former combatants make the transition to productive farmers. (Altogether, approximately 28,000 former MNLF combatants throughout Mindanao have been assisted to become small-scale commercial producers of corn, rice, seaweed, high-value fish, and vegetables). During the ceremony, Secretary Esperon congratulated the cooperative's members on their steady economic progress and as "one former combatant to another," pledged to bring a lasting peace to the region in his capacity as Presidential Peace Advisor.

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE-PHILIPPINES UPDATE

17. (U) The JSOTF-P conducted a briefing for Secretary Esperon and the Ambassador, outlining the combined Civil Military Operations (CMO) the JSOTF has completed or will accomplish in the southern Philippines during FY08. All projects are completed through, by, and with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), Local Governing

Units (LGUs) and local contractors. A total of 255 projects are in various stages of completion. The 255 projects include 193 Engineering Civic Action Programs (ENCAPs) and 62 Medical Civic Action Projects (MEDCAPs) that provided medical treatment for 17,303 people. Included in the 193 ENCAPs are: 25 road segments totaling 110 kilometers; 14 ACCs; 4 Bridges; 3 Clinics; 3 Piers; 56 Schools; 59 Water projects. The projects have affected 1,398 barangays and approximately 2 million people by increasing security, providing jobs, providing economic growth and development, and basic and essential services.

18. (U) The JSOTF also provided a briefing on its Military Information Support Team (MIST). The MIST helps shape the information environment to support the AFP and provide support to public safety. The MIST highlighted its "Your AFP" series of products consisting of posters, pamphlets, comic books, radio and TV commercials designed to increase public support for the AFP as the "people's armed forces" and to reassure the populace that the AFP is there to protect them. Many of the products include images of the AFP conducting CMO projects, such as grading a road with a bulldozer and digging wells to provide fresh water for local communities. These products were also designed to show that the AFP has many more capabilities beyond the internal defense mission.

SOLID MEDIA COVERAGE

19. (U) Local media were present at all public events and provided favorable coverage of the Ambassador's visit, which was also picked up by national Philippine media. The Ambassador also conducted live call-in interviews to a local and national radio station during drive-time hours where she was able to reiterate the USG's commitment to a stable, prosperous Philippines and our hopes for the successful conclusion of a peace agreement between the Philippine government and Muslim insurgents.

KENNEY